

# The Coffee Trail: A Muslim Beverage Exported to the West

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## THE COFFEE TRAIL: A MUSLIM BEVERAGE EXPORTED TO THE WEST

Much of the writing about the history of coffee highlights the wide differences in opinion concerning how and when coffee was discovered. Historians failed to reach consensus and it is still difficult to establish a credible date. The earliest manuscripts known to study the history of coffee were of Muslim origin dating from the 15th century. As we shall see, these works provided a comprehensive amount of information about the social nature of this beverage as well as the process of its spread to various parts of the Muslim world, an event that took place around the century when these books were produced. In relation to its first discovery, however, there are some considerable gaps as these manuscripts relied on their contemporary eyewitnesses who did not go beyond a few generations in following its historical chronology. Because of this, historians who adhered to these manuscripts contended to show the late introduction of coffee into the Muslim world. Hattox<sup>1</sup>, for example, put it in the 15th century. Quoting these Arabic sources, he claimed that Yemeni Muslims brought it from Ethiopia around the 1400s. In one account provided by Fakhr al-Din Abu Bakr Ibn Abi Yazid Al-Makki<sup>2</sup> gave the following story.

In his reporting of events, he referred to a group of Sufis under the name of Shathilya order who used to make Al-Qahwa from Kafta using the leaves of Al-Gat, a stimulating plant well known in Arabia. Due to sudden shortages of Al-Gat in Aden Sheikh al-Dhabhani (d.1470-71) instructed his followers to use Bunn, coffee beans, instead<sup>3</sup>. However, this does not necessarily prove that the first usage of coffee in Yemen was in the 15th century. Coffee could have been known before but substituted the Al-Gat in that particular event. But Hattox provided other Arabic sources, which he claims to set the introduction of coffee to mid 15th century at the earliest<sup>4</sup>. This theory echoed that of Ellis John<sup>5</sup> (1774) who quoted Ibn Sheehab Al-Din (15th century) attributing the first introduction of drinking Coffee into Yemen to Jamal Al-Din, the Mufti of Aden, who was nearly his contemporary. In one of his travels to Persia, Jamal Al-Din saw some of his countrymen drinking coffee, which at that time he did not much attend to. On his return to Aden, he fell ill and decided to try it to see whether he could improve his condition. On so doing, he did not only recover his health, but perceived other useful qualities. These included relieving of headache, enlivening the spirits, and preventing drowsiness. Consequently, he recommend the drink to his fellow Sufis to enable them to pass the night in prayer. The example and authority of the Mufti gave reputation to Coffee spreading it through the population and slowly replacing the Al-Gat drink.

The Turkish sources, however, provide earlier dating. Brisel in his "Kahvaler Kitab"<sup>6</sup> put the first discovery of coffee to 1258. His account refers to a certain Sheikh named Omar who discovered it accidentally through hunger, which made him eat the beans. There is a circumstantial evidence which endorses the Turkish view and suggests that coffee indeed was known to the Muslims long before the 15th century. The presence of industry of ceramic and silver pots and ewer shapes, that can only refer to the presence of coffee, were long established in the Islamic World along the 13th and 14th centuries<sup>7</sup>. There is further evidence, which indicates that coffee was known to Muslims even before Brisel's date of 1258. We know that Ibn Sina (Avicenna) administered coffee as a medicine around the first millennium. There is a reference and a description of its medical effect in his "Qanun Al-Tib" in which he described coffee as: "It is a material that comes from the Yemen. It is said that it is produced from the roots of the Thorn Aegiptia which drops at maturation. The better type is yellow and light, of good smell. The white and heavy one is

instead bad. It revives the body. it cleans the skin, and dries up the humidities that are under it, and gives an excellent smell to all the body." The quote clearly established the presence of coffee in Yemen, at least, sometime in the 10th century. Before him, in 9th century, Al-Razy (Rhazes) also mentioned some medical properties of coffee. However, both authors used the name Bunc, the Ethiopian name for coffee. Ukers<sup>8</sup> brought the discovery of coffee back to year 750 when an Arab shepherd, named Khalid, living in Ethiopia observed the behavioural changes on his goats on eating from a particular bush. That bush became known as the coffee tree. This story is widely repeated and accepted by most historians.

From the above it appears clearly that coffee was discovered by the Muslims sometimes around the 10th century. It was first used and cultivated in Yemen. Instead of eating the beans, the Yemenis boiled them creating the famous drink of Al-Qahwa. There is also consensus that the first users of coffee were the Sufis who used it as a stimulus to stay awake during late night Thikr (remembrance of God). Coffee spread to the rest of Muslims of Yemen and eventually to all the Muslim world through travellers, pilgrims and traders. It reached Makkah and Turkey sometime in the late 15th century.

Reported by Abd-Al-Qadir Al-Jaziri<sup>9</sup> (around 1558) in his book 'Umadat Al-Safwa', from Fakhr al-Din Abu Bakr Ibn Abi Yazid Al-Makki who maintained that al-Qahwa did not reach Makkah until the end of the 9th century of Hijra (15th CE). He later provided another source, which gave details on how coffee reached Cairo. Ibn Abd Al-Ghaffar reported that in the first decade of the tenth century (Hijra) coffee was brought to the Yemeni students of the Alzhar Medrassa who used it to boost their performance in various Thikr circles<sup>10</sup>. From Al-Azhar, coffee soon entered the streets, shops and houses of Cairo. By early fifteenth century (1453) coffee reached Turkey with the first coffee shop, Kiva Han, opening in Istanbul in 1475.

In addition to dating the first Muslim use of coffee, much of the writing about coffee in the West has been to highlight the controversy of coffee and coffee houses in the land of Islam, claiming that Islam condemned the use of coffee due to its addiction. It is true that coffee-houses were disliked because of the wasteful and playful nature of its activity, especially in places where it is associated with female singers and dancers and so on.



Figure 1. Arabic and Turkish coffee set (pot and cups).

## The Transfer of Coffee to Europe

Muslims inside and outside Europe through various channels of contact played a major role in transferring new ideas, customs, foods, arts, various sciences and technologies. Most people in US, Britain and Europe would associate the influence of Muslim cuisine with Curry and Donner Kebab, being meals introduced by the new immigrant. Very few would know of the Muslim origin of coffee and cappuccino. The story of the transfer of the tradition of coffee beverage to Europe is just one example.

### Coffee in Italy

Historic sources indicate that coffee arrived in Europe through Italian links. The active trade between Venice and North Africa, Egypt and the East transported Muslim goods including coffee to this leading European port. After discovering the taste of coffee, Venetian merchants were convinced of its commercial potential and subsequently embarked on its importation since 1570. As with any new custom, the rich were the first to indulge in this beverage. At a later stage, coffee was sold in the markets of Venice; eventually becoming widely available for the general public. The first Coffeehouses of Venice opened in 1645. By 1763 Venice had no less than 218 coffee outlets. Eventually, coffee became the object of trade between Venice and Amalfi, Turin, Genoa, Milan, Florence and Rome, from where it was transmitted to the rest of Europe.

Another source of transmission was the writing of travellers and diplomatic missions to the Muslim world. An example of the latter is Gian Francesco Morosini, an ambassador of the Venetian Republic to the Ottoman Sultan, in 1582. In a report, from Istanbul, he described how in the East (Turkey) there were some business premises where public used to meet several times a day over a dark hot beverage. Another source revealed that Paduan Prospero Alpino, a famous Italian botanist and physician, brought with him some sacks of coffee from the East (mostly from Egypt) and in his *History of the Egyptian Plants*, published at Venice in 1591, described the coffee tree and its fruit which he saw in the garden of a captain of the Janissaries<sup>11</sup>.

Like many items imported from the Muslims, coffee was met initially with a religious rejection.. Pope Clemente VIII (1536-1605) was urged to ban its consumption. The story reveals that after tasting it, the Pope approved and blessed it<sup>12</sup>. This approval gave the green light for the consumption of the beverage opening the door for coffee to reach all European houses.

### Coffee in England

The English interest in coffee (as well as, in Turkish baths and flowers) took place in the 17th century when the west was fascinated with Turkish prosperous lifestyle. The coffee beans came from Mokah on the Red Sea (Yemen) imported by the East India Company and from Aleppo by the Levant Company. Its early association with England was in medical use, which appeared in a two-page pamphlet by 'An Arabian Physician' (Dr Edward Pococke) in Oxford in 1659<sup>13</sup>. The first coffeehouse in England has been put to 1650, although drinking coffee started a few years earlier. Burn<sup>14</sup> reported that an Oxford student named Nathaniel Conopius was the first to make the coffee drink for his own use while staying in Oxford. He is known to have left Oxford University in 1648. In relation to the establishment of the first coffeehouse, Burn also connected it to Oxford with a Jewish businessman named Jacob opening the first house in 1650 at the

Angel in the Parish of St. Peter, East Oxford. According to Darby<sup>15</sup>, the introduction of coffee was through a Turkish route. He reported that a certain Turkish merchant named Pasqua Rosee first brought it. This must have been before 1650, the date when a café named Pasqua Rosee's Head, after the Turkish merchant, was opened in St Michael's Alley, Cornhill and London. However, Ellis<sup>16</sup> put it after 1652 as he provided a detailed account about Mr. Pasquae Rosee. He was a Greek servant of a certain Mr. Edwards, a Turkey merchant who brought him to London. Mr Pasqua knew how to roast and make coffee the Turkish way. He was the first to sell coffee in a coffee-house in George-yard, Lombard-Street. Later, in 1658 another café under the name 'Sultanness Head' was opened in Cornhill and by 1700 there were about 500 coffeehouses in London<sup>17</sup>.

Coffeehouses gained infamous popularity in Britain in the period between 17th and 18th century. Such popularity can be seen in the voluminous works of literature, which dealt with this subject. From these remarkable works one can conclude that coffeehouses were used as a leisure venue usually associated with reading newspapers, playing games, smoking tobacco, as well as drinking tea and coffee. They were also venues for political and religious debates of hot issues affecting the population<sup>18</sup>. Due to the latter function, the houses were first required to be licensed by the 1663 regulation. Later, in 1675, a proclamation described them as "seminaries of sedition" and ordered their closure, only to be allowed to re-open a few days<sup>19</sup> later.

Coffeehouses were dubbed "penny universities" describing the social view of these premises as knowledge centres, a sign that they frequented by students, scholars, artists and people of talent. The penny was used to refer to the price of cup of coffee<sup>20</sup>.

Another feature associated with English coffeehouses is the spread usage of Muslim inspired signs, usually depicting a head of a Muslim person, posted outside the premises to attract visitors. Portraits and names such as The Saracen's Head, The Sultan's Head or The Turks Head<sup>21</sup> decorated most English streets showing the British fascination with Muslims.

Another feature illustrating further this appreciation is the issuing of tokens, which spread particularly in the 17th century. These were prints representing the sign (logo) of the coffeehouse or tavern depicting the portrait of the Muslim figure or name. These tokens were sold to loyal customers who collected them. A few of these signs still decorate the façade of some British taverns and inns.

## Coffee in France

Antoine Galland, in his 1699 book 'de l'origine et du progres du café'<sup>22</sup>, admitted the Muslims association with coffee, tea and chocolate. He reported that Mr. de la Croix, the interpreter of King Louis 14th, informed him that a certain Mr. Thevenot, who had travelled through the East, brought coffee to Paris. On his return to that city in 1657, Mr Thevenot used the beans he brought for his own consumption and treated his friends with it; amongst them was Monsieur de la Croix. La Croix confirmed that since then he had continued to drink it mainly from Armenian merchants who settled in Paris, and by degrees brought it into reputation in that city. However the real boost of the spread of this beverage in Paris came after 1669. In that year Paris received Suleiman Agha, the Ambassador of Sultan Muhammed the Fourth, who, with his entourage, brought along a considerable quantity of coffee beans. Not only they treated their French and European guests with coffee drink but also gifted some beans to the royal court and its entourage. During



his stay (July 1669 to May 1670), the Ambassador managed to firmly establish the drinking habit among the Parisians. Two years later, an Armenian named Pafeal, set up the first coffeehouse in Paris, but without success. Other Armenians and some Persians tried their luck but without much success either. Finally, some Frenchmen opened spacious and elegant premises ornamented with lustre works, tapestry, glass and picturesque decor, selling coffee, with tea, chocolate, and other refreshments. They attracted Parisians from wealthy merchants, people of fashion and men of letters, soon their number in Paris alone exceeded three hundred.

In relation to the first introduction of coffee into France, Galland traced it back to 1644. This is the year when some French men from Marseilles, who accompanied Monsieur de la Haye to Constantinople, brought back with them not only some coffee, but the proper vessels and apparatus for making and drinking it. In 1671, the first coffeehouse was opened in Marseilles in the Exchange District. The coffeehouse succeeded well in becoming crowded particularly by Turkey merchants and traders to the Levant who found it very convenient for discussing and settling matters relating to commerce. This success encouraged the appearance of other coffeehouses in Marseilles spreading later through entire France.

### **Coffee in the Rest of Europe**

After Italy, France and England, the rest of Europe followed suit and embraced this new beverage. In Germany, for example, sources indicate that Rauwofus<sup>23</sup>, a German physician and botanist who visited the Levant in 1573, was among the first Europeans to mention coffee in his book published in 1582. In relation to Vienna, historic sources provide a different account. After the defeat of the Turkish Army besieging Vienna in 1683, it left behind sacks of coffee beans. The European armies defending the city, which included German and Polish armies as well as many other European volunteers, claimed this bounty and took it to their home land. However the first coffee-house to appear in Berlin was dated back to around 1720.

The Dutch managed to set up large plantations of coffee in their colony of Java in Indonesia. Although it is not known where they obtained the seeds from but one can expect it to be from any part of Muslim south east Asia, and probably India. From Java, the Dutch directed a successful business, as they became importers and distributors of coffee beans to Europe. It is reported that the spread of coffee planting is attributed to the Dutch. They gifted King Louis 14th of France a coffee tree for his Paris Royal Botanical Gardens, the Jardin des Plantes. However, such suggestion needs to be taken cautiously as King Louis 14th also received coffee gifts from the Turkish Ambassador (see above).

### **Coffee in the Americas**

The introduction of coffee to the Americas is attributed to France through its colonisation of many parts of the continent, starting with the Martinique and the colonies of the West Indies where first French coffee plantations were founded.

### **From Turkish Coffee to Cappuccino and Croissant**

The consumption of Coffee in Europe was largely based on the traditional Muslim preparation of the drink. This consisted of boiling the mixture of roasted coffee powder, sugar and water. However, since 1683 a

new way of preparing and drinking coffee was invented. The Cappuccino coffee was inspired by a certain Marco d'Aviano, a priest from the Capuchin monastic order, who was sent to rally Catholics and Protestants against the Turks on the eve of the Battle of Vienna in 1683. The legend, as reported by BBC news (Sunday, 27 April, 2003), related that following the victory of the Europeans, the Viennese made coffee from the abandoned sacks of

## Turkish Coffee

Finding it too strong for their taste, they mixed it with cream and honey<sup>24</sup> (figure 2). This made the colour of coffee turn brown resembling the colour of the Capuchins' robes. The Viennese named it cappuccino in honour of Marco D'Aviano's order. Since then, Cappuccino has been drunk for its enjoyable taste, though originally was also drunk to celebrate the European victory over the Ottomans.



Figure 2. The Cappuccino coffee was invented from mixing Turkish coffee, left by defeated Turkish army in Vienna, with cream and honey.

## The Croissant

Another symbolic item associated with coffee is the famous Croissant pastry, often taken at breakfast (figure 3). Chew reported the legend behind the invention of the widely consumed cake, which goes back to 1686. Hungarian bakers made a cake in the shape of a crescent, as a symbol of Islam, to celebrate and later commemorate the defeat of the Ottoman army.



Figure 3. The Croissant was invented to celebrate the defeat of the Ottoman army in Vienna.

## Conclusion

This paper shows that influence Muslim civilisation extended beyond science, technology, art and architecture to even the particularities of European traditions of eating and drinking. The story of how coffee (and cappuccino) and coffeehouses came to Italy, France, England and the rest of Europe is but one example of many.

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## Notes:

- 1 Hattox, R.S. (1988) 'Coffee and Coffeehouses; the origins of a social beverage in the Medieval Near East', University of Washington Press, Seattle and London.
- 2 Ibn al-`Imad, `Abd al-Hayy ibn Ahmad, (1623-1679). 'Shadharat al-dhahab fi akhbar man dhahab / lil-mu'arrikh Abi al-Fallah', Maktabat al-Qudse, al-Qahirah , 1931, vol. 8, p.40. cited by Hattox (1988), op.cit.
- 3 Hattox, op.cit, p.18.
- 4 see *ibid.*, chapter 2, pp.11-28.
- 5 Ellis, John (1774) 'An Historical Account of Coffee with an Engraving, and Botanical Description of the Tree : To Which Are Added Sundry Papers Relative to Its Culture and Use, as an Article of Diet and of Commerce'. Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, London:.
- 6 Birsal, Salâh. (1975), 'Kahveler kitab'. Koza Yayınlar, bask- Istanbul. I owe the translation of some parts of this work to .....
- 7 Sweetman, J. (1987), 'The oriental obsession : Islamic inspiration in British and American art', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. (Cambridge studies in the history of art).
- 8 Ukers, William H. (1935), 'All About Coffee', 2nd Edition; The Tea & Coffee Trade Journal Company, New York.
- 9 Abd-al-Qadir ibn Muhammed al-Ansari al-Jaziri al-Hanbali (circa 1558), 'Umdat al-Safwa fi hill al-qahwa', 1826 ed. De Sacy, A.I.S., Chrestomathie arabe, 2nd edition, 3 volumes, Paris.
- 10 *Ibid.*, vol.1, pp.147-48.
- 11 See Ellis John (1774), op.cit.
- 12 Arnold, N and Patel, V(1993) 'Coffee is one of our favourite drinks. Find out where it is grown and how it first came to this country', The Guardian Education, September 7, 1993.
- 13 See Chew Samuel C. (1974) 'The crescent and the rose', Oxford University Press, New York, pp.184-185.
- 14 Burn, J.H. (1855), 'A descriptive catalogue of the London traders, tavern, and coffee-house token'. - 2nd ed. Arthur Taylor, London, pp.109-110.
- 15 Darby, M.(1983) 'The Islamic Perspective, An aspect of British Architecture and Design in the 19th century', Leighton House Gallery, London.
- 16 Ellis John (1774), op.cit.
- 17 Sweetman, 1987, p.49
- 18 Willis, John E. Jr. (1993), 'European Consumption and Asian Production," Consumption and the World of Goods, editors, John Brewer and Roy Porter, 133-147. Routledge, London , p.133. \_
- 19 Burn (1855), op. cit. p.109.
- 20 Ellis Aytoun (1956), 'The penny universities: a history of the coffee houses', Secker & Warburg, London.
- 21 Other examples include: Sultan Solymán's Head in Aldersgate Street, London, 1666, Sultan Morat's head in Barbican, London after 1666, and Turk's Head in Chacery Lane, London 17th century. For more see Burn (1855) op.cit.
- 22 Antoine Galland (1699) 'de l'origine et du progres du café', Éd. originale J. Cavelier Paris, 1992- La Bibliothèque, coll. L'Écrivain Voyageur, Paris.
- 23 Ellis John (1774), op.cit.
- 24 See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2979993.stm>.



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